

We claim:

1. 1. A method of enhancing voice mail messages by incorporating a selected background sound with a voice mail message for playback to a listener.
2. 2. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the voice mail message comprises a plurality of message segments, and wherein one or more selected background sounds are incorporated, each of which is associated with one or more of the message segments.
3. 3. The method according to Claim 1, wherein a plurality of background sounds are selected to be incorporated with the voice mail message.
4. 4. The method according to Claim 2 or Claim 3, wherein at least one of the background sounds provides emotional cues for the voice mail message.
5. 5. The method according to Claim 2, wherein at least one of the background sounds is a theme song associated with a speaker who leaves the voice mail message.
6. 6. The method according to Claim 1, further comprising the step of inserting a selected audio file into the voice mail message for the playback to the listener.
7. 7. The method according to Claim 2, further comprising the step of

2 inserting one or more selected audio files into the voice mail message for the playback to
3 the listener.

1 8. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound is selected by a
2 speaker of the voice mail message.

1 9. The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more selected background sounds
2 are selected programmatically.

1 10. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound is a default
2 background sound for a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 11. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound is a
2 dynamically-selected choice selected from among a plurality of background sounds.

1 12. The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more selected background sounds
2 are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available on a
3 telephone or telephone system from which the voice mail message originates.

1 13. The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more selected background sounds
2 are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available from a
3 subscription service.

1 14. The method according to Claim 12 or Claim 13, wherein the dynamic selection is
2 performed randomly.

1 15. The method according to Claim 12 or Claim 13, wherein the dynamic selection is
2 performed using a profile associated with a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 16. The method according to Claim 12 or Claim 13, wherein the dynamic selection is
2 performed based upon an identification of an intended recipient of the voice mail message.

1 17. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound is a single
2 selection that is available on a telephone or telephone system from which the voice mail message
3 originates.

1 18. The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more selected background sounds
2 are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available to an
3 apparatus on which the voice mail message is recorded.

1 19. The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more selected background sounds
2 are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available from a
3 telephone company system through which the voice mail message passes as the voice mail
4 message is being left for the listener.

1 20. The method according to Claim 1, further comprising the step of transmitting the selected
2 background sound from a telephone or telephone system used by a speaker of the voice mail
3 message.

1 21. The method according to Claim 20, wherein the selected background sound has been
2 compressed prior to the transmitting.

1 22. The method according to Claim 2, further comprising the step of transmitting identifiers of
2 each of the selected background sounds from a telephone or telephone system used by a speaker
3 of the voice mail message.

1 23. The method according to Claim 2, further comprising the step of transmitting an address
2 of each of the selected background sounds from a telephone or telephone system used by a
3 speaker of the voice mail message, wherein each address may be used to locate a file containing a
4 respective one of the selected background sounds.

1 24. The method according to Claim 23, wherein the address is a Uniform Resource Locator.

1 25. The method according to Claim 12, further comprising the step of loading one or more
2 new background sounds onto the telephone or telephone system, thereby revising the plurality of
3 background sounds that are available.

1 26. The method according to Claim 18, further comprising the step of loading one or more
2 new background sounds onto the apparatus, thereby revising the plurality of background sounds
3 that are available.

1 27. The method according to Claim 19, further comprising the step of loading one or more
2 new background sounds onto the telephone company system, thereby revising the plurality of
3 background sounds that are available.

1 28. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound may be
2 selected using one or more of: a dual-tone multi-frequency (DTMF) capability of a telephone
3 used by a speaker of the voice mail message; a touch-sensitive display screen of the telephone;
4 automated instructions stored on or executed by the telephone or a telephone system of the
5 speaker; a key sequence operated using keys of the telephone; or a voice recognition capability,
6 which may be provided by a voice messaging system which records the voice mail message.

1 29. The method according to Claim 7, wherein the selected audio files may be selected using
2 one or more of: a dual-tone multi-frequency (DTMF) capability of a telephone used by a speaker
3 of the voice mail message; a touch-sensitive display screen of the telephone; automated
4 instructions stored on or executed by the telephone or a telephone system of the speaker; a key
5 sequence operated using keys of the telephone; or a voice recognition capability, which may be
6 provided by a voice messaging system which records the voice mail message.

1 30. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the incorporating is performed by
2 conferencing the selected background sound into a 3-way call between a speaker of the voice mail
3 message and a receiver thereof.

1 31. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the incorporating is performed during the
2 playback to the listener.

1 32. The method according to Claim 3, wherein the incorporating is performed prior to the
2 playback to the listener.

1 33. The method according to Claim 3, further comprising the steps of:
2 transmitting identifiers of each of the selected background sounds from a telephone or
3 telephone system used by a speaker of the voice mail message; and
4 using each of the transmitted identifiers to access a stored copy of the respective selected
5 background sound;
6 and wherein the incorporating step incorporates the accessed copies.

1 34. A method of enhancing voice mail messages by inserting a selected audio file into a voice
2 mail message for playback to a listener.

1 35. The method according to Claim 34, wherein the voice mail message comprises a plurality
2 of message segments, and wherein more than one audio file is inserted into the voice mail
3 message, or the selected audio file is inserted multiple times into the voice mail message.

1 36. The method according to Claim 34, wherein the inserted audio file provides additional
2 context for the voice mail message.

1 37. The method according to Claim 35, wherein at least one of the audio files is an audio
2 signature associated with a speaker who records the voice mail message.

1 38. The method according to Claim 37, further comprising the step of playing the audio
2 signature rather than the voice mail message to the listener.

1 39. The method according to Claim 37, further comprising the step of using the audio
2 signature to deduce information about the voice mail message.

1 40. The method according to Claim 34, wherein the voice mail message comprises the
2 selected audio file.

1 41. The method according to Claim 34, wherein the selected audio file is a theme song of a
2 speaker of the voice mail message.

1 42. An apparatus for improving voice mail messaging, comprising:
2 means for transmitting a voice message from a user of the apparatus to a separately-
3 located recording means;
4 means for storing one or more pre-recorded sound files on the apparatus;
5 selection means for selecting, from the pre-recorded sound files, one or more of: (1) a
6 background sound and (2) an audio file to be transmitted; and
7 transmission means for transmitting the selection to the recording means for use with the
8 transmitted voice message.

1 43. A method of merchandising pre-recorded sound files, further comprising steps of:
2 receiving requests for selected ones of the pre-recorded sound files for use as background
3 files to be incorporated with voice mail messages and/or for use as audio files to be inserted into
4 voice mail messages; and
5 providing the selected ones, in response to the step of receiving requests.

1 44. The method according to Claim 43, wherein the receiving and providing steps are
2 implemented by a for-fee service provider.

1 45. The method according to Claim 43, wherein the receiving and providing steps are
2 implemented by marketing a telephone for use in improving distance communications.

1 46. A method of improving telephone conversations, comprising incorporating a selected
2 background sound into a telephone conversation between a caller and a called party.

1 47. The method according to Claim 46, wherein the selected background sound is a theme
2 song of the caller.

1 48. The method according to Claim 46, wherein the incorporating is performed by
2 conferencing the selected background sound into a 3-way call between the caller and the called
3 party.

1 49. The method according to Claim 46, wherein the selected background sound is a default
2 background sound for the caller.

1 50. The method according to Claim 46, wherein the selected background sound is selected
2 programmatically.

1 51. The method according to Claim 46, wherein the selected background sound is selected by
2 the caller.

1 52. A system for enhancing voice mail messages, comprising:
2 a voice mail message comprising one or more message segments;
3 one or more background sounds;

4 means for incorporating one or more of the background sounds with one or more of the
5 message segments; and

6 means for playing the voice mail message to a listener with the incorporated background
7 sounds.

1 53. The system according to Claim 52, wherein at least one of the background sounds
2 provides emotional cues for the voice mail message.

1 54. The system according to Claim 52, further comprising means for inserting a selected audio
2 file into the voice mail message for the playback to the listener.

1 55. The system according to Claim 52, wherein at least one of the selected background sounds
2 is selected by a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 56. The system according to Claim 52, wherein at least one of the background sounds is a
2 default background sound for a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 57. The system according to Claim 52, wherein the one or more background sounds are
2 dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available on a
3 telephone or telephone system from which the voice mail message originates.

1 58. The system according to Claim 57, wherein the dynamic selection is performed randomly.

1 59. The system according to Claim 57, wherein the dynamic selection is performed based
2 upon an identification of an intended recipient of the voice mail message.

1 60. The system according to Claim 52, wherein the one or more background sounds are
2 dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available to an
3 apparatus on which the voice mail message is recorded.

1 61. The system according to Claim 52, further comprising means for transmitting the selected
2 background sounds from a telephone or telephone system used by a speaker of the voice mail
3 message.

1 62. The system according to Claim 52, further comprising means for transmitting an address
2 of each of the selected background sounds from a telephone or telephone system used by a
3 speaker of the voice mail message, wherein each address may be used to locate a file containing a
4 respective one of the selected background sounds.

1 63. The system according to Claim 62, wherein the address is a Uniform Resource Locator.

1 64. The system according to Claim 52, further comprising means for loading one or more new
2 background sounds onto the apparatus, thereby revising the plurality of background sounds that
3 are available.

1 65. The system according to Claim 52, wherein the background sounds may be selected using
2 one or more of: a dual-tone multi-frequency (DTMF) capability of a telephone used by a speaker
3 of the voice mail message; a touch-sensitive display screen of the telephone; automated
4 instructions stored on or executed by the telephone or a telephone system of the speaker; a key
5 sequence operated using keys of the telephone; or a voice recognition capability, which may be
6 provided by a voice messaging system which records the voice mail message.

1 66. The system according to Claim 52, wherein the incorporating is performed by
2 conferencing the selected background sounds into a 3-way call between a speaker of the voice
3 mail message and a receiver thereof.

1 67. A system of enhancing voice mail messages, comprising:
2 one or more audio files;
3 a voice mail message comprising one or more message segments;
4 means for selecting at least one of the audio files; and
5 means for inserting the selected at least one audio file into the voice mail message for
6 playback to a listener.

1 68. The system according to Claim 67, wherein at least one of the audio files is an audio
2 signature associated with a speaker who records the voice mail message.

1 69. A system for improving telephone conversations, comprising:
2 means for establishing a telephone conversation between a caller and a called party; and
3 means for incorporating one or more background sounds into the telephone conversation.

1 70. The system according to Claim 69, wherein the means for incorporating further comprises
2 means for conferencing the one or more background sounds into a 3-way call between the caller
3 and the called party.

1 71. The system according to Claim 69, wherein the one or more background sounds are
2 selected by the caller.

1 72. A computer program product for enhancing voice mail messages, the computer program
2 product embodied on one or more computer-readable media and comprising:
3 computer-readable program code means for selecting one or more background sounds;
4 and
5 computer-readable program code means for incorporating the selected background
6 sounds with a voice mail message for playback to a listener.

1 73. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein at least one of the
2 background sounds is a theme song associated with a speaker who leaves the voice mail message.

1 74. The computer program product according to Claim 72, further comprising means for
2 inserting one or more selected audio files into the voice mail message for the playback to the
3 listener.

1 75. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein the selected background
2 sounds are selected programmatically.

1 76. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein the selected background
2 sound are dynamically-selected choices selected from among a plurality of background sounds.

1 77. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein the selected background
2 sounds are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available
3 from a subscription service.

1 78. The computer program product according to Claim 77, wherein the dynamic selection is
2 performed using a profile associated with a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 79. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein a particular one of the
2 selected background sounds is a selection that is available on a telephone or telephone system
3 from which the voice mail message originates.

1 80. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein the selected background
2 sounds are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available
3 from a telephone company system through which the voice mail message passes as the voice mail
4 message is being left for the listener.

1 81. The computer program product according to Claim 72, further comprising means for
2 transmitting identifiers of each of the selected background sounds from a telephone or telephone
3 system used by a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 82. The computer program product according to Claim 74, wherein the selected audio files
2 may be selected using one or more of: a dual-tone multi-frequency (DTMF) capability of a
3 telephone used by a speaker of the voice mail message; a touch-sensitive display screen of the
4 telephone; automated instructions stored on or executed by the telephone or a telephone system
5 of the speaker; a key sequence operated using keys of the telephone; or a voice recognition
6 capability, which may be provided by a voice messaging system which records the voice mail
7 message.

1 83. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein the computer-readable
2 program code means for incorporating further comprises computer-readable program code means
3 for conferencing the selected background sounds into a 3-way call between a speaker of the voice
4 mail message and a receiver thereof.

1 84. A computer program product for enhancing voice mail messages, the computer program
2 product embodied on one or more computer-readable media and comprising:
3 computer-readable program code means for selecting one or more audio files; and
4 computer-readable program code means for inserting the selected audio files into a voice
5 mail message for playback to a listener.

1 85. The computer program product according to Claim 84, wherein at least one of the audio
2 files is an audio signature associated with a speaker who records the voice mail message.

1 86. A computer program product for improving telephone conversations, the computer
2 program product embodied on one or more computer-readable media and comprising:
3 computer-readable program code means for selecting one or more background sounds;
4 and
5 computer-readable program code means for incorporating the selected background sounds
6 into a telephone conversation between a caller and a called party.

1 87. The computer program product according to Claim 86, wherein at least one of the
2 selected background sounds is a theme song of the caller.

1 88. The computer program product according to Claim 86, wherein the computer-readable
2 program code means for incorporating further comprises computer-readable program code means

- 3 for conferencing the selected background sound into a 3-way call between the caller and the
- 4 called party.